LITERARY HUB

Why a New Adaptation of *The Master and Margarita* is Setting Russian Society Aflame

Cameron Manley on the Last Onscreen Rendition of Mikhail Bulgakov's Iconic Novel

By Cameron Manley March 19, 2024

One of the most celebrated lines from Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* emerges from the lips of the devil himself. "Manuscripts don't burn," Woland, the mysterious Professor of Black Magic, tells the eponymous Master. The declaration echoes throughout the narrative: try as the Soviet authorities might, they cannot ban, repress, or destroy the Master's art, because the unyielding ideas within have taken on a life of their own.

Bulgakov's work was highly controversial at the time for its allegorical anti-Soviet rhetoric. Much like his protagonist, the author, out of despair for the suffocating climate of Stalinist repression, consigned the initial draft of his manuscript to the flames. The subsequent treatment of the novel by authorities—censored to the point of butchery—has long been viewed as a prime example of the Bulgakov's central point.

Michael Lockshin's new screen adaptation of Bulgakov's opus appears to be heading down a similar path. Despite surging to the top of Russia's domestic box office just days after its release in January, it has raised the ire of pro-Kremlin bloggers who resent the director's stance against the country's war in Ukraine, as well as the story's core message.

The Master and Margarita has consistently resisted screen adaptation: Yuri Kara's 1994 film (which was not released in cinemas until 2011) and Vladimir Bortko's 2005 miniseries for Russian television were both poorly received. The prominent Russian film critic Anton Dolin went as far as to call the book "cursed," given how previous adaptations had consistently failed to live up to the brilliance of the original text.

Lockshin's Russo-American background, however, has led him to approach the book from a unique angle. Unlike other Russian directors, who have feared taking too many liberties when adapting the novel for the silver screen, Lockshin demonstrates remarkable creativity. He successfully combines a deep understanding of the original text and author with Hollywood-style storytelling techniques, and condenses the immensity of the novel into a succinct and compelling narrative that also remains faithful to the original's key themes.

One of the most significant departures from Bulgakov's text is the timing of the Master's appearance. In the book, the Master, a disillusioned writer rejected by Soviet critics, emerges only in the latter half, with the early narrative revolving around the chaotic exploits of demons in Moscow. In Lockshin's adaptation, the love affair between Margarita Nikolaevna, the discontented wife of a Soviet official, and the Master becomes the central focus. The intimacy of this entanglement is beautifully conveyed by Yuliya Snigir and Evgenii Tsyganov, whose real-life partnership only amplifies the on-screen chemistry.

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A pivotal scene in the early moments of the film, absent from the original text, occurs during the trial of the Master's play. In Lockshin's interpretation, the subplot concerning Pontius Pilate's trial of Yeshua Ha-Notsri (Jesus of Nazareth) is depicted as a play authored by the Master. The play's editor, Berlioz, cowardly disavows its author, while the Soviet critic Latunsky condemns it for its anti-Soviet and religious themes, ultimately leading to it being withdrawn from production.

Lockshin's ingenuity is on full display in his careful tracking of the rivalry between critic and author. The film's opening scene, for example, is a flashforward in which Margarita, the Master's muse, lathered in a magical cream that turns her invisible and allows her to fly across Moscow, ransacks Latunsky's apartment. The rationale behind this choice of opening becomes discernible only later when we discover that the various strands of the film (the escapades involving Woland and his entourage, as well as those of Margarita) are intricately interwoven products of the Master's imagination.

Thus, the Master assumes a dual role in the story: both as a character within the narrative and as the creative force shaping the plot. When Margarita raids Latunsky's apartment, then, it is the imaginative spirit of the repressed author triumphing over the corrupt and institutionalised Soviet critic.

Lockshin deftly balances tragedy with farce, creating a film that moves at an breakneck pace: from Margarita's vulnerable nakedness to the lavish and hedonistic dinners at the Writer's Union where the elite dance to the devil's jazz (Anna Drubich's soundtrack is a triumph in and of itself); from the quiet hush of the Master's homely introspection to the noisy clamour of construction that perpetually fills Moscow's socialist streets. Maxim Zhukhov's cinematography is in part to thank for this, with his lens capturing a number of inventive angles.

For example, when Berlioz's decapitated head falls from his body, we roll with it, seeing everything through Berlioz's own, dying eyes. Or, as the Master and Ivan Bezdomny, the Soviet hack writer, slowly descend into madness, the audience is spun through a series of chaotic mirages with echoing voices overlayed. At every moment, the viewer feels as though they, too, are being pulled into the disorder of Woland's demonic exploits.

At points, the audience is left feeling short-changed. While the cat Behemoth (Yura Borisov), an amusing and engaging character in Bulgakov's original, comes out well-textured, he is given far too insignificant a role in the chaos unleashed by Woland's demonic coterie. Furthermore, the authenticity of the Pontius Pilate scenes (conducted entirely in Aramaic and Latin with Russian dubbed over), while impressive, are an unnecessary distraction. Simple subtitles would have maintained the linguistic originality whilst avoiding the jarring mismatch of additional voices.

But these shortcomings are more than outweighed by the haunting presence of August Diehl, whose depiction of Woland stands as a testament to the film's exceptional casting. The professor exudes a chilling blend of sarcasm and menace, speaking exclusively to the Master in German. This incarnation of Satan, another creation of the Master's fractured psyche, finds its origins in Goethean rather than Russian lore and thus embodies a part of the Master that, in modern Russia, would be designated a "foreign agent"—a spirit of rebellion, imaginative chaos, and dissent.

Indeed, the film is rich with poignant nods to the present day. Scenes depicting patriotic parades steeped in Soviet propaganda evoke strong parallels to Kremlin's contemporary Red Square marches. Additionally, when one hears chants proclaiming, "Oil production is our spiritual food!" or Bezdomny's cry "Why do we need heaven when we have Crimea?" one cannot help but feel that the story's messages have been subtly fine-tuned for a contemporary audience, even as they reflect sentiments that were prevalent in the early Soviet era.

Perhaps most pertinently, the Master, like his character Yeshua Ha-Nozri, is on trial for asserting that "all power is violence against people." To state as much under Pilate, or under Stalin, or, indeed, under Putin, is a dangerous, almost revolutionary act. One has only to think of the widespread repression of contemporary writers and cultural practitioners (Boris Akunin, Sasha Skochilenko, Lyudmila Ulitskaya and the many other journalists and opposition figures currently being silenced) to see the contemporary echoes of Bulgakov's text. Indeed, just as reading the non-censored, underground version of Bulgakov's text in the late 1960s became a revolutionary act in and of itself, in Putin's Russia, going to see Lockshin's adaptation has become a brave act of revolt. *The Master and Margarita* is a powerful story (re)told at a critical time.

Lockshin—best known for directing *Silver Skates*, Netflix's first Russian-language original film—has himself become the target of online slander from a host of so-called "Z-bloggers" and propagandists.

The film, shot over the course of four months in 2021, was originally slated to be released by Universal Pictures International in 2023. Those plans were disrupted, however, by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which prompted Universal and other Hollywood studios to exit the Russian market.

As the war in Ukraine unfolded, Lockshin openly expressed his anti-war stance on social media and, in the weeks since the film's release, many Russian "patriots" have denounced the director for tarnishing the Kremlin's revisionist version of Soviet history.

Some have labelled him a hypocrite because his *Master and Margarita* received 800 million rubles (£7 million) in funding from Russia's state-backed Cinema Foundation.

The response from state propagandists has been especially scathing, with one going as far as to advocate for criminal charges to be filed against Lockshin. Another has branded the director "scum" and fondly reminisced about how such "enemies of the people" were punished under Stalin. Perhaps the most infamous Russian propagandist, Vladimir Solovyev, criticized the film on his evening talk show for its "sharp, anti-Soviet, and anti-modern Russian theme." The intensity of the criticism has led some to fear that the film may ultimately be banned. But there is a tangible irony here. After all, this is precisely what Bulgakov's story was about: a writer who is censored by critics and persecuted by the state for his artistic creation.

Lockshin, though, has one last trick up his sleeve.

In the final scene, as the devil departs, we watch as the Master's vision of Moscow, abounding in red Soviet stars and glorious palaces, burns to the ground. The message is clear: manuscripts, and the ideas contained within them, don't burn, but authoritarian regimes, and their despotic leaders, do.

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